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Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor

House of Burgess: Bush presents 'The Art of Leadership'

The 43rd president publicly debuts artwork

By Rob Burgess
Tribune columnist

On April 5, “The Art of Leadership: A President’s Personal Diplomacy,” opened at the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum on the campus of Southern Methodist University. The display, which runs through June 3, boasts “portraits of more than two dozen world leaders” painted by Bush, according to the official literature.

Unwitting subjects included: Prime Minister Tony Blair, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, President Vladimir Putin, Chancellor Angela

Merkel, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. The show also features a 7-minute video produced by The History Channel.

“Painting portraits of my friends and some people who weren’t necessarily my friends gave me a sense to convey a feeling I have about them,” Bush says in the clip.

According to Bush, he began painting in 2012 after reading Winston Churchill’s essay “Painting as a Pastime.”

“It inspired me,” he explained in the video.

The essay first appeared in *The Strand Magazine* in two parts: “Hobbies” (December 1921) and “Painting as a Pastime” (January 1922). “Try [painting] if you have not done so — before you die,” wrote Churchill. There are parallels between the artistic lives of Bush and Churchill: they are largely traditionalists who work in oil on canvas and who both embraced the art form after leading costly military campaigns.

In Bush’s case, we are still calculating the price of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. During World War I, Churchill was stripped of his title as First Lord of the Admiralty after the disastrous Battle of Gallipoli. “When this war is over I shall confine myself entirely to writing and painting,” Churchill said in November 1915, according to Martin Gilbert’s 1994 book, *In Search of Churchill: A Historian’s Journey*.”

Churchill completed over 500 paintings, brawling his way through each one. "Painting is like fighting a battle," Churchill wrote in his essay. Following that logic, Bush could have fought harder here. Roberta Smith called Bush's show "a hagiographic soup of an exhibition" in *The New York Times* on April 7. Some, including writer/director Greg Allen, have pointed out Bush didn't exactly challenge himself. "Bush painted his portraits ... from the top search result on Google Images," wrote Allen on his website.

In the leaked paintings first revealed last year by hacker "Guccifer," Bush seemed to be wrestling with himself. I stand by my original positive assessment of his more personal work from my Feb. 13, 2013 column, "The artwork of George W. Bush." His imaginative subjects included: his feet sticking out of bathtub water; his partial reflection in a mirror; and a dog staring mournfully through metallic gates at the far-away White House.

Unfortunately, the Bush camp is now running away from his affecting, early period. "When asked about the bathing paintings in interviews ramping up to the exhibition, Bush distanced himself from them — and indirectly ridiculed anyone who took them seriously — by saying that he had only painted them to shock his teacher," wrote Smith. In an April 4 "Today" show segment with Jenna Bush Hager, his daughter and a NBC contributing correspondent, when she brought up the bathroom self-portrait, he derisively compared his likeness to Alfred E. Neuman.

Per my March 27, 2013 column, "Dubya can repaint his legacy," I still think he should auction his paintings, donating proceeds to veterans. He's conducted similar sales before. "A pickup truck used by [Bush] at his Texas ranch was sold for \$300,000 at an auction ... [which benefits] the Fisher House Foundation, a charity that provides free housing for families of military service members who are receiving medical treatment," reported Reuters' Marcie Richter on Jan. 20, 2013. I know his paintings could easily fetch way more, especially if he took some chances.

Near the end of the History Channel video, Bush gives a glimpse into his true psyche. "I expect I'll be painting 'til I drop," he says. "And my last [brush] stroke as I'm heading to grave, I wonder: what color it will be?"

Now, there's an image.

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